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SUBJECT: SECURITY POLICY INITIATIVE (SPI) 10: OPCON AND
MORE OPCON

REF: A. SEOUL 03104
[1](#)B. SEOUL 03222
[1](#)C. SEOUL 03132
[1](#)D. SEOUL 03249

Classified By: AMB. ALEXANDER VERSHBOW. REASONS 1.4 (b/d)

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: The OPCON transfer issue continues to generate widespread opposition throughout the ROK as we head into SPI-10. Indications are the ROK delegation may refuse to sign off on the Command Relationships Study (CRS) if we hold to our position of designating 2009 as the X year for OPCON transfer. President Roh has been unsuccessful in countering strong opposition from policy elites and the public at-large fearful that transfer of OPCON equates to U.S. "abandonment" of the ROK. MND, MOU and MOFAT officials, and members of the Defense Committee at the National Assembly, have also voiced concerns over potential instability on the Peninsula, distrust of the Roh Administration, and possible damage to the Alliance. Some question the ROK capability to take over wartime OPCON. Others doubt the National Assembly will approve the needed sizable increases in defense spending. We have stressed our assessment that the ROK is ready for OPCON and have voiced the U.S. Government's strong commitment to the ROK for the long term. Many nonetheless seek clarification of our offer to provide "bridging capabilities." Timing appears to be the most problematic aspect of the issue, because of the politics of the upcoming ROK presidential election in 2007, as well as worries that now is not the time given DPRK missile launches and a possible nuclear test. Embassy recommends Washington to signal some flexibility on the timing of the OPCON transfer, since it is in our interest to ensure the broadest possible consensus in Korea on such a key issue for the future of the Alliance. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (S) The issue of the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) continues to generate widespread opposition throughout the Republic of Korea as the U.S. and ROK delegations head into the tenth session of the Security Policy Initiative (SPI-10). Indications are that the ROK delegation headed by Deputy Minister of Defense Policy Kwon An Do will refuse to sign off on the Agreed Report of the ROK-U.S. Command Relationships Study (CRS) -- i.e. the "roadmap -- if the U.S. side insists on designating 2009 as the X year for OPCON transfer. It was hoped agreement on the CRS would set the stage for final review and establishment of the transfer date at the upcoming Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) on October 20, 2006.

13. (S) In a nationally televised KBS interview on August 31, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun attempted to counter strong opposition to his own call for OPCON transfer by 2009, arguing that the transfer would not result in either a reduction of USFK support, nor an increased economic burden on the ROK. However, his efforts have done little to stem the rising tide of opposition. Erstwhile supporters and conservatives alike have complained that he is playing fast and loose with South Korea's national security. (NOTE: Political cartoons in the ROK today hinted in very poor taste that perhaps the ROK needs a military-style coup like the one that occurred in Thailand). Clearly, however, the voices of opposition to early OPCON transfer are, for the most part, coming from serious and thoughtful quarters of Korean society. In recent weeks that opposition has included:

- All the former South Korean defense ministers.
- 70 of 100 retired four-star generals in the ROK.
- 160 former diplomats, including 3 foreign ministers.
- The "Hope 21" group of moderate Uri Party lawmakers.
- The opposition Grand National Party of Korea.
- The Chair of the National Assembly's Defense Committee.
- 10 military academy alumni organizations.
- The Korean Veterans Association.

14. (S) Why are Korean elites and much of the public at large so strongly opposed to an early transfer? Minister of National Defense Yoon Kwang-ung cautioned the Ambassador on August 14 (reftel A) that public concerns over transfer of OPCON equate to U.S. "abandonment" of the Republic of Korea. He strongly urged the USG agree to 2012 as the X year, rather than pressing for 2009 so that, as he put it, the public could be better prepared and educated on what ROK security will look like after OPCON transfer. He predicted an agreement on 2012 would calm Korea and that the many retired generals and other security experts voicing concern would come to support implementation fully. The Minister repeated his appeal for flexibility on timing at a September 25 meeting with the Ambassador (septel), as did National Security Advisor Song Min-soon the same day.

15. (S) Other MND contacts, as well as ROK officials from the Ministries of Unification (MOU) and Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT), have likewise argued their strong preference for transfer of OPCON in 2012 (reftel B). They are concerned that an earlier transfer would have a negative effect on stability on the Peninsula, increase distrust of Roh Administration handling of ROK national security affairs, and further damage the Alliance. Some express doubt the ROK military has the needed capabilities, or the view that more time is required to transform existing ROK command structures into a ROK warfighting HQ. (NOTE: Any required increase in ROK defense spending will be dependent upon National Assembly approval. The ROKG's current 2007-2011 defense spending plan ambitiously calls for nine percent increases in defense spending for each of those years. END NOTE).

16. (S) Alongside the Command, the Embassy has stressed the USG's assessment that ROK assumption of wartime OPCON can be achieved in a reasonably short timeframe at low risk. We have also voiced our strong commitment to the ROK over the long term, so long as our forces are needed and welcomed here. The Ambassador has also personally assured ROK officials that the United States does not envision significant force reductions in connection with the OPCON transfer. The Ambassador has emphasized that our more agile position in the region, coupled with the Koreans' robust military capabilities, equate to a stronger (not weaker) alliance posture. However, what typically follows such assurances are concerned requests from Korean officials for more clarification regarding what the United States Government intends to offer the ROK in the way of "bridging capabilities."

17. (S) What appears to be most problematic for many in South Korea is that the security situation on the Peninsula has in some respects deteriorated owing to the July 4 missile

launches by the DPRK and the looming threat of a possible North Korean nuclear test. Troublesome aspects of the rise of China have also come to be more keenly felt by the South Korean populace, as evidenced by their highly emotional reaction to competing claims over the sacred mountain the Koreans call Paektusan and the Chinese refer to as Changbaishan. More sophisticated thinkers in Seoul realize that U.S.-China relations are far more than a zero-sum game, but many still worry that if the U.S. role on the Peninsula is perceived as "diminished" in any way as a result of U.S. troop reductions and OPCON transfer, PRC influence over the future of the Peninsula will be enhanced. For these reasons, it would be very damaging to the U.S.-ROK Alliance if the Korean public were to come to feel "let down" by the United States. The opposition Grand National Party of Korea -- whose representatives have been traveling to Washington in recent weeks to lobby forcefully against OPCON transfer -- announced an official "Position on Transfer of Wartime Operational Control" that summarizes their view as follows:

--First, the security of the Korean Peninsula is more fragile than ever.

--Second, early transfer of wartime OPCON can seriously weaken the Korean people's trust of the United States.

--Third, the majority of the Korean people oppose the policy of the Roh Administration.

18. (S) COMMENT: Transfer of OPCON is a good-news story that has been hijacked by politicians in Korea. First, President Roh misleadingly cast the issue as "regaining of Korean Sovereignty." Now his opponents are using the issue to accuse him of damaging ROK national security while elevating their own campaigns to succeed him in the Blue House. The reality is that the Republic of Korea has reached the point where it is strong enough to assume the important responsibility of wartime Operational Control within a short timeframe, during which it must enhance several key defense capabilities. And it got there largely because its national security, democratization and economic growth were secured by an effective U.S.-ROK Alliance.

19. (S) COMMENT CONTINUED: To maintain that record of success, while continuing to effectively deter North Korean aggression, it is imperative that both our governments conduct this transformation of the Alliance in as reassuring a manner as possible. Command leadership and others with experience negotiating with the ROKG know that a firm date is needed to prompt the South Koreans to do all they need to do, and spend all they need to spend, to accomplish this goal. At the same time, however, there are serious military and political issues to be worked out. A new warfighting mechanism needs to be established. New OPLANs need to be written, agreed to and trained. Meanwhile, our diplomatic forces will need to address the complicated political and legal issues of what happens to the UN Command and management of the Armistice Agreement. For these reasons, Embassy Seoul recommends that we take our foot off the accelerator for 2009 and show some flexibility to allow some "give" on the transfer date. Such a position will go a long way to assure Korean supporters of the Alliance that there's no danger of U.S. abandonment, and create a calmer atmosphere in which national consensus in Korea can solidify. Our vital interest lies in maintaining public confidence in and support for the Alliance, not completing OPCON transfer by any particular date. END COMMENT.

VERSHBOW